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(54) **STEERING WHEEL SYSTEMS AND TORQUE FEEDBACK ACTUATOR ASSEMBLIES FOR USE IN STEER-BY-WIRE VEHICLES**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC B62D 5/006; B62D 1/10; B62D 1/183; B62D 1/185
See application file for complete search history.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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(Continued)

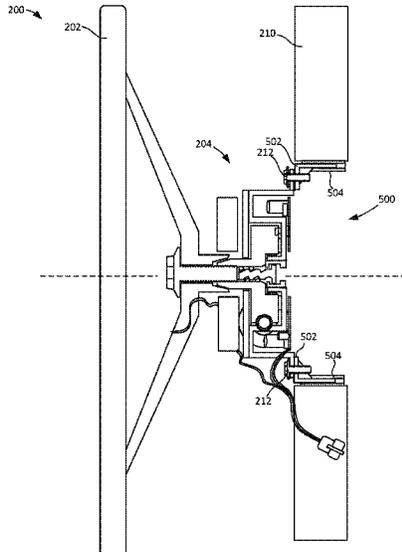
Example steering wheel systems and torque feedback actuator assemblies for use in steer-by-wire vehicles are described herein. An example steering wheel system includes a steering wheel and a torque feedback actuator assembly. The torque feedback actuator assembly includes a housing and a helical gear rotatably disposed in the housing. The steering wheel is coupled to and coaxially aligned with the helical gear. The torque feedback actuator assembly also includes a motor with a worm gear engaged with the helical gear to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel by driving the helical gear.

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

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20 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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| (52) | U.S. Cl.
CPC . F16H 57/039 (2013.01); F16H 2057/02034
(2013.01) | |

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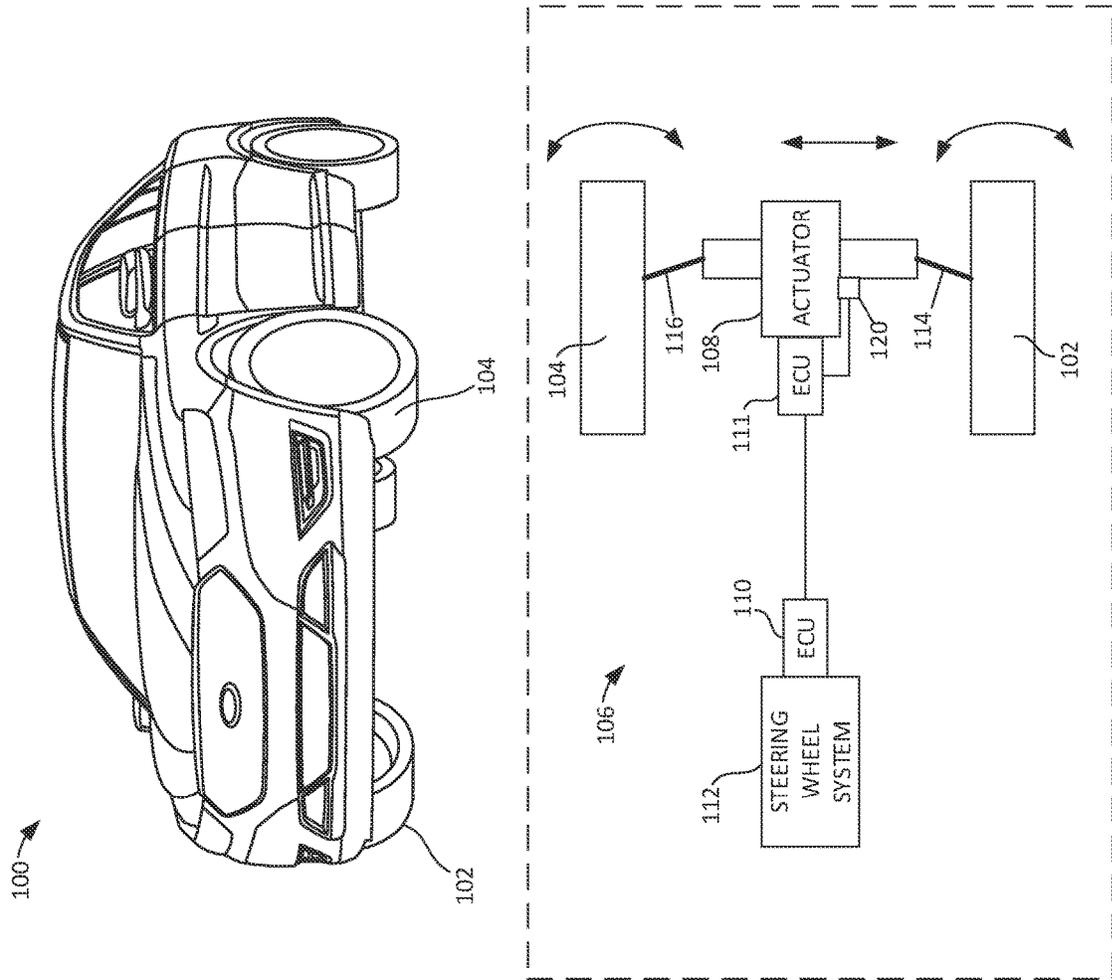


FIG. 1

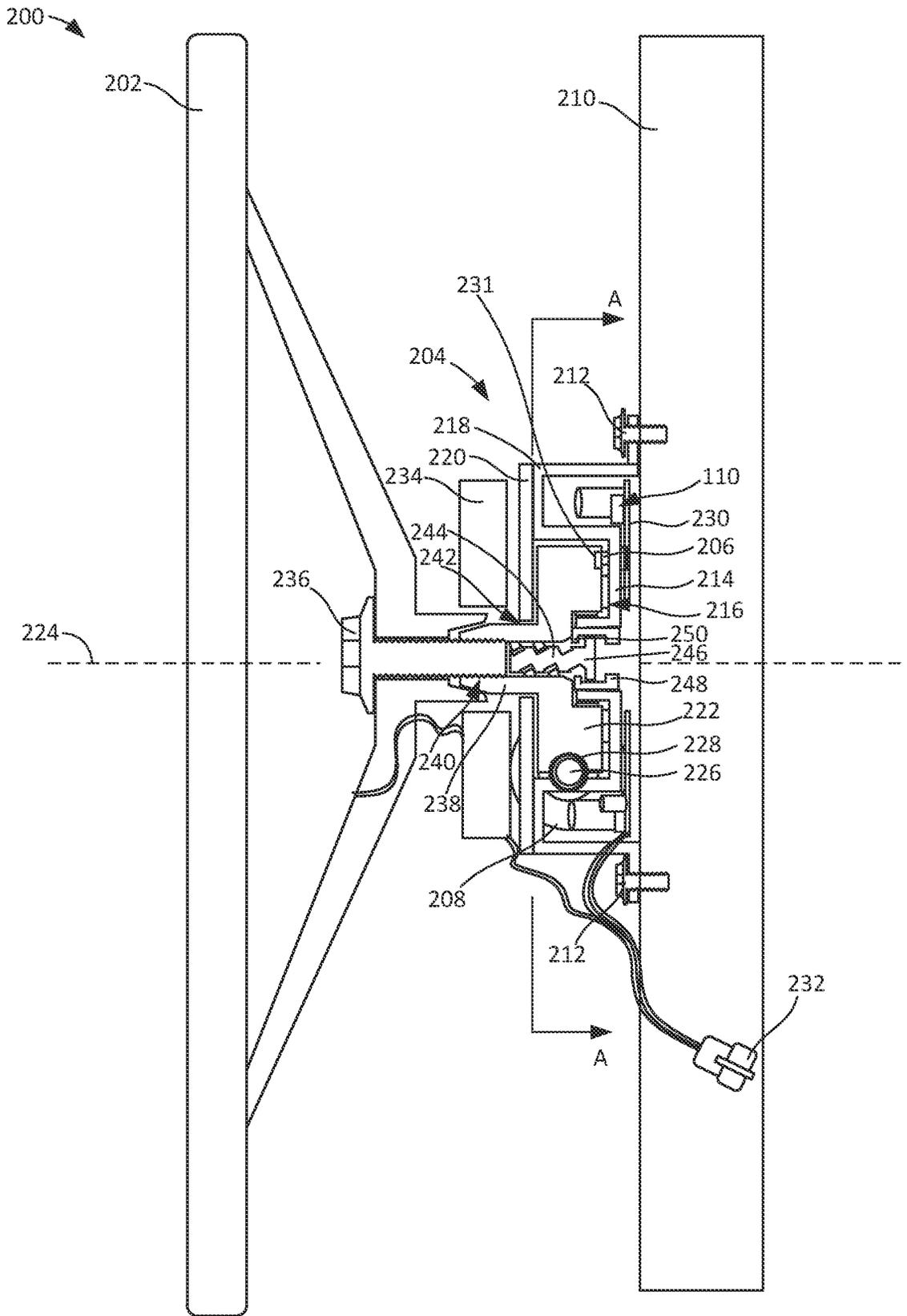


FIG. 2

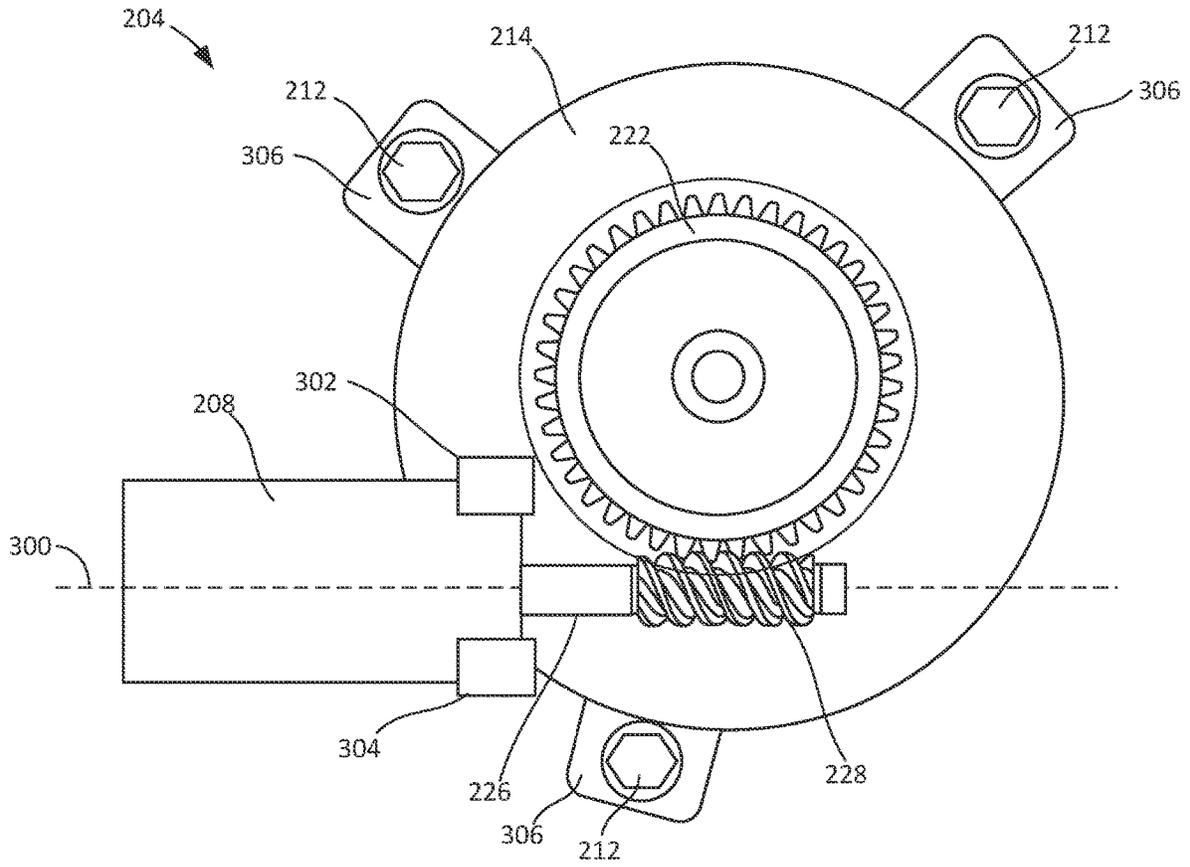


FIG. 3

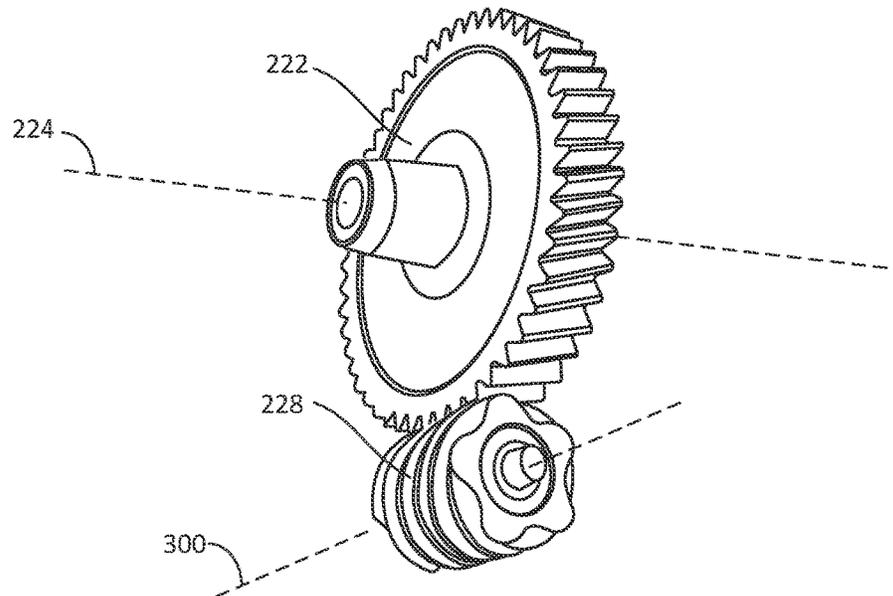


FIG. 4

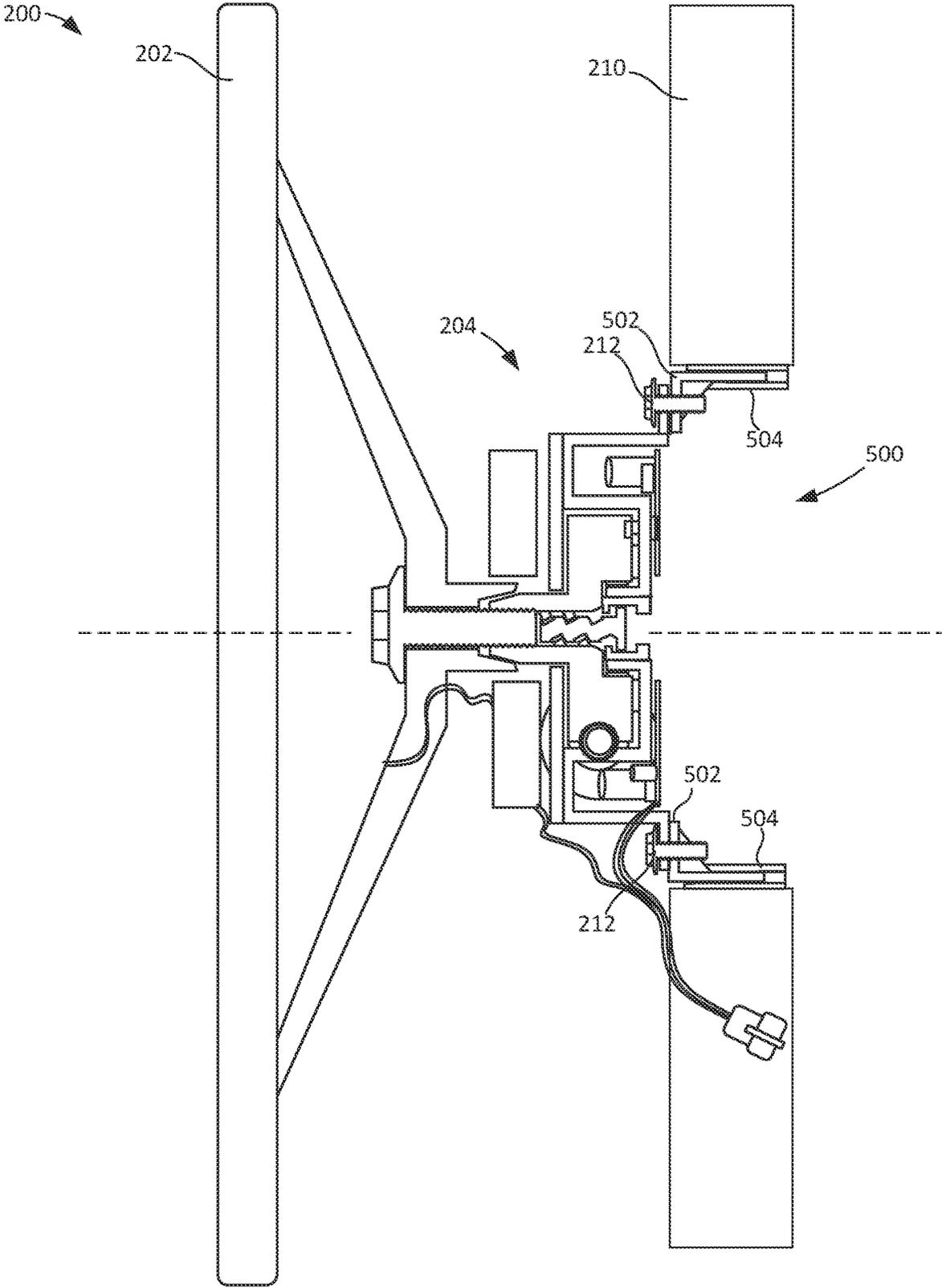


FIG. 5

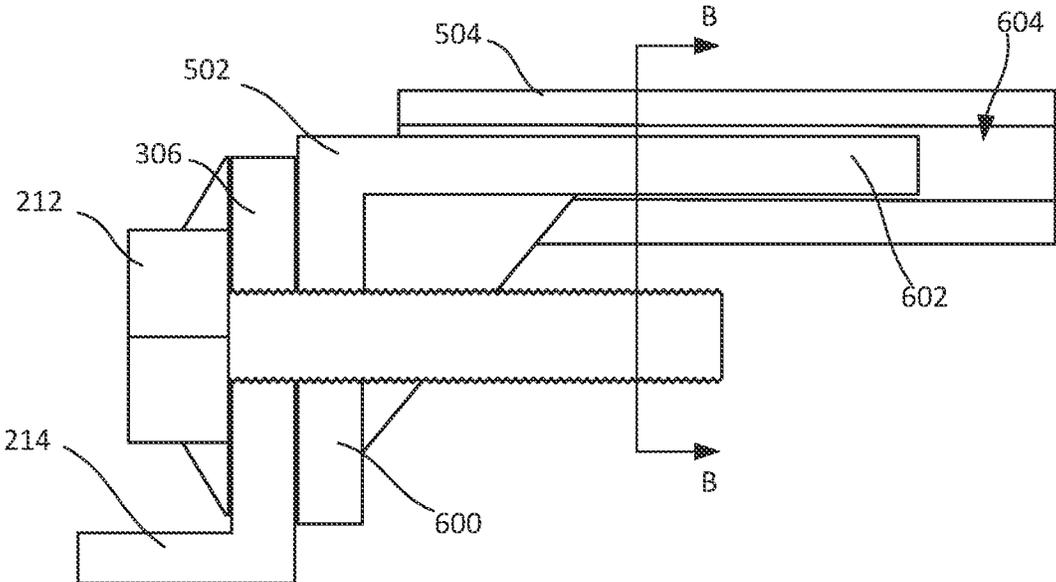


FIG. 6A

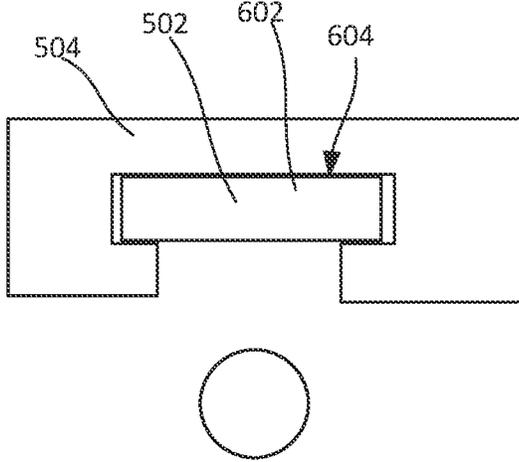


FIG. 6B

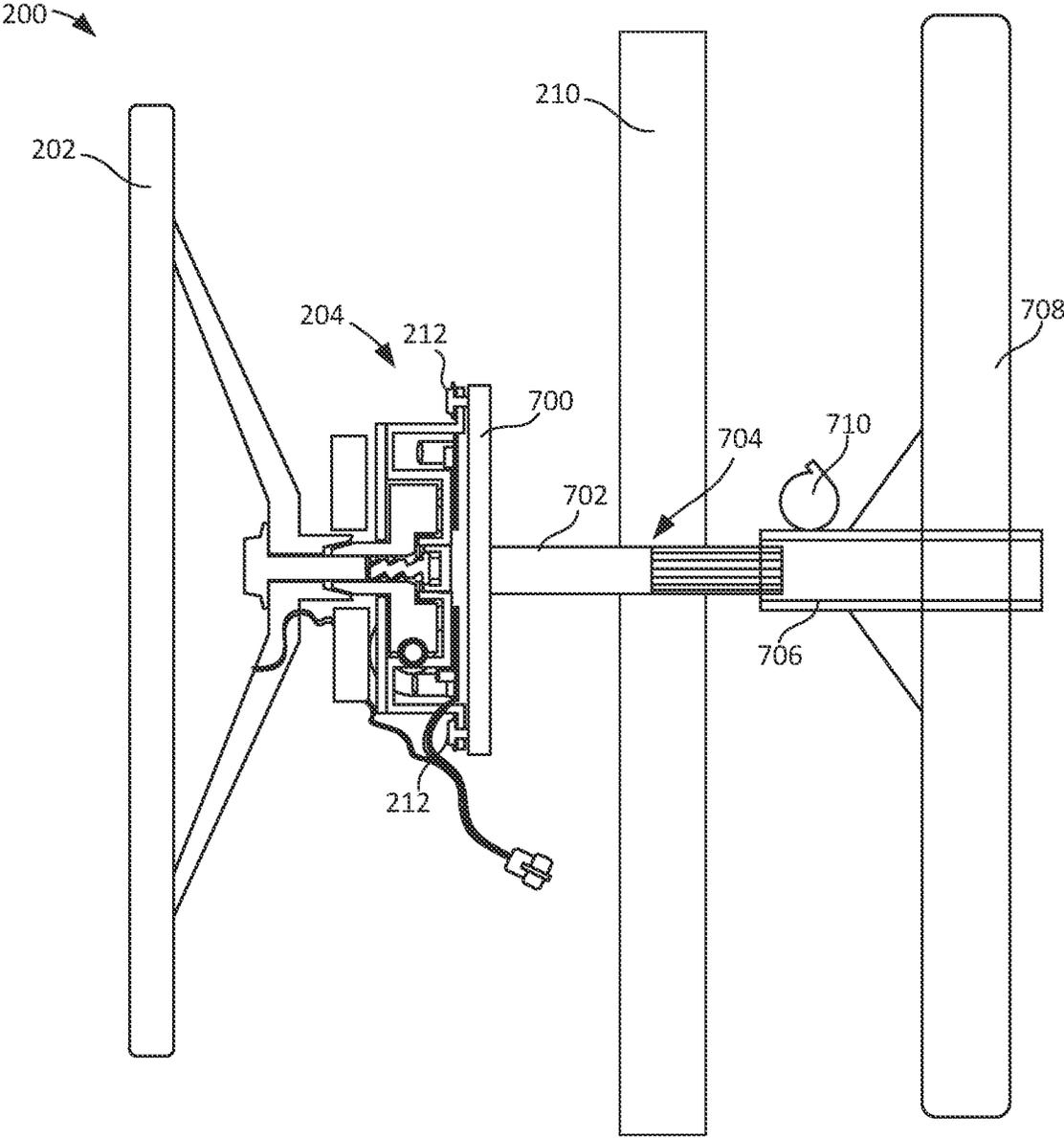


FIG. 7

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STEERING WHEEL SYSTEMS AND TORQUE FEEDBACK ACTUATOR ASSEMBLIES FOR USE IN STEER-BY-WIRE VEHICLES

RELATED APPLICATION

This patent arises from a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 15/921,224 (now U.S. Pat. No. 10,953,912), titled "Steering Wheel Systems and Torque Feedback Actuator Assemblies for use in Steer-By-Wire Vehicles," filed Mar. 14, 2018, which is hereby incorporated by this reference in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE DISCLOSURE

This disclosure relates generally to vehicles and, more particularly, to steering wheel systems and torque feedback actuator assemblies for use in steer-by-wire vehicles.

BACKGROUND

Known vehicles typically include a mechanical linkage that connects the steering wheel to the front wheels of the vehicle and enables a driver to steer the vehicle by rotating the steering wheel. For example, many known steering systems include rack and pinion gears that translate rotational motion of a steering wheel to linear actuation or movement of one or more tie rods, which are connected to the front wheels of the vehicle. The tie rods change the angle of the front wheels, thereby turning the wheels and steering the vehicle.

In recent years, steer-by-wire systems have been implemented in vehicles. Steer-by-wire systems eliminate traditional mechanical linkage assemblies between the steering wheel and the wheels of the vehicle. Instead, an actuator operates to turn the wheels based on a rotational angle of the steering wheel.

SUMMARY

An example steering wheel system for use in a steer-by-wire vehicle is disclosed herein. The example steering wheel system includes a steering wheel and a torque feedback actuator assembly. The torque feedback actuator assembly of the example steering wheel system includes a housing and a helical gear rotatably disposed in the housing. The steering wheel is coupled to and coaxially aligned with the helical gear. The torque feedback actuator assembly also includes a motor with a worm gear engaged with the helical gear to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel by driving the helical gear.

An example vehicle disclosed herein includes a dashboard and a steering wheel system coupled to the dashboard to interface with a steer-by-wire system of the vehicle. The steering wheel system of the example vehicle includes a steering wheel and a torque feedback actuator assembly including a helical gear. The steering wheel is coupled to and coaxially aligned with the helical gear. The helical gear is to be driven in one direction or the other to rotate the steering wheel. The helical gear is disposed between the steering wheel and the dashboard.

An example apparatus disclosed herein includes a helical gear that is to be coupled to and aligned with a rotational axis of a steering wheel and a motor with a worm gear engaged with the helical gear. The motor is to drive the helical gear to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel. The motor

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and the worm gear are aligned along an axis that is perpendicular to and offset from the rotational axis.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates an example vehicle and an example steer-by-wire system of the vehicle in which examples disclosed herein may be implemented.

FIG. 2 is a side view of an example steering wheel system having an example torque feedback actuator assembly constructed in accordance with teachings of this disclosure.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the example torque feedback actuator assembly of FIG. 2 taken along line A-A in FIG. 2.

FIG. 4 is a perspective view an example worm gear and an example helical gear of the example torque feedback actuator assembly of FIGS. 2 and 3.

FIG. 5 illustrates an example collapsing mechanism that may be used with the example steering wheel system of FIG. 2.

FIG. 6A is a side view of an example collapsing bracket used in the example of FIG. 5.

FIG. 6B is a cross-sectional view of the example collapsing bracket taken along line B-B in FIG. 6A.

FIG. 7 illustrates another example collapsing mechanism that may be used with the example steering wheel system of FIG. 2.

The figures are not to scale. Instead, the thickness of the layers or regions may be enlarged in the drawings. In general, the same reference numbers will be used throughout the drawing(s) and accompanying written description to refer to the same or like parts. As used in this patent, stating that any part (e.g., a layer, film, area, region, or plate) is in any way on (e.g., positioned on, located on, disposed on, or formed on, etc.) another part, indicates that the referenced part is either in contact with the other part, or that the referenced part is above the other part with one or more intermediate part(s) located therebetween. Stating that any part is in contact with another part means that there is no intermediate part between the two parts.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Disclosed herein are example steering wheel systems and example torque feedback actuator assemblies for use in vehicle steer-by-wire systems. The example torque feedback actuator assemblies disclosed herein utilize smaller, lighter motors than known torque feedback actuators while still producing excellent torque feedback control on the steering wheel. Further, the example torque feedback actuator assemblies disclosed herein are smaller and, thus, require less room in the cabin of the vehicle than known torque feedback actuator assemblies in steer-by-wire vehicles. Before disclosing the example torque feedback actuator assemblies and related aspects in detail, a brief description of known steer-by-wire systems is provided below.

In known steer-by-wire systems, the steering wheel of the vehicle is not directly mechanically connected to the wheels. Instead, a sensor measures a steering wheel angle (SWA) of the steering wheel and an actuator is activated to turn the wheels in one direction or the other based on the measured SWA. Known steer-by-wire systems also include an electric motor (referred to as a torque feedback motor or actuator) to provide torque feedback on the steering wheel. In particular, to maintain the steering wheel at the corresponding angle as the wheels and to mimic the feel of a traditional steering

wheel that is mechanically connected to the wheels, the torque feedback motor produces a counter-force on the steering wheel.

In known steer-by-wire systems, the steering wheel is connected to a steering column that extends into the dash of the vehicle. The torque feedback motor (including the body of the motor and the output shaft) is disposed in the dashboard and oriented parallel to the steering column. The output shaft of the motor is connected to the steering column via a belt and pulley system. Some of these known steer-by-wire systems also include a brake system that is connected to the steering column by another belt and pulley system. As such, a significant amount of space is needed in the dashboard of the vehicle to accommodate the torque feedback motor and associated components. In other known steer-by-wire systems, the motor is oriented along the same axis as the steering column and is connected directly to the steering column, which similarly requires a significant amount of space in the dashboard of the vehicle to accommodate the motor. Also, with a motor connected directly to the steering column (without gearing), the motor needs to be relatively large to provide proper torque feedback to the steering wheel. Further, these known steer-by-wire systems often include an external SWA sensor or a network of gears connected to the steering column that interface with a sensor that determines the SWA, which increases the overall envelope or packaging of the steer-by-wire system. As such, these known steer-by-wire systems are generally bulky, heavy, and complex. Also, some of these known steer-by-wire systems include redundant motors, sensors, belt systems, etc., which add further to the complexity and weight to the steer-by-wire system.

Disclosed herein are example torque feedback actuator assemblies that can provide torque feedback to a steering wheel as part of a steering wheel system for a steer-by-wire vehicle. Example torque feedback actuator assemblies disclosed herein that are generally smaller, lighter, and more compact than known assemblies. Some example torque feedback actuator assemblies can be easily attached and detached from a dashboard of a vehicle as desired. As such, the example torque feedback actuator assembly and steering wheel can be easily and quickly removed from the cabin of the vehicle when not being used, which creates more usable space in the cabin of the vehicle. For example, if the vehicle is capable of operating in an autonomous mode and the steering wheel is not needed, the torque feedback actuator assembly and/or steering wheel can be removed or folded away and stored. In other examples, the torque feedback actuator assembly and steering wheel may remain on the dashboard while the vehicle operates in autonomous mode. In some such examples, the motor of the torque feedback actuator assembly is used to keep the steering wheel stationary at a particular position (e.g., at the 0° position). For example, a small amount of current may be provided to the motor, which maintains the steering wheel at the particular position, and, if a user attempts to rotate the steering wheel, a larger current is provided to the motor that creates a counter torque (e.g., resistance), against the user's force, to maintain the steering wheel in the same position. Also, in some examples, the example steering system and/or torque feedback actuator assembly can be used in other vehicles by attaching the torque feedback actuator assembly to a dashboard of another steer-by-wire vehicle.

An example torque feedback actuator assembly disclosed herein includes a helical gear (sometimes referred to as a worm wheel) that is coupled to a steering wheel in a coaxial manner. In some examples, the helical gear is disposed

within a housing that may be coupled to the dashboard for mounting the torque feedback actuator assembly in the vehicle. The example torque feedback actuator assembly includes an electric motor (sometimes referred to as a torque feedback motor or actuator) with a worm gear that is engaged with the helical gear. The motor and the worm gear are orientated along an axis that is perpendicular to and offset from the central rotational axis of the steering wheel and helical gear. As a result, the motor does not extend far (if at all) into the depth of the dashboard, as is the case in known steer-by-wire systems that generally require significant space in the dashboard. In other words, the motor is disposed in a generally sideways or transverse orientation, which enables the motor and the helical gear to utilize less space (e.g., depth) behind the steering wheel. Further, in some examples, the example torque feedback actuator assembly does not include a steering column extending into or through the dashboard like those in known systems.

The motor of the example torque feedback actuator assembly may be activated to rotate the helical gear and, thus, rotate the steering wheel. For example, the motor may be activated to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel while the user is driving the vehicle in a manner that simulates the counter-force the wheels would otherwise impart to the steering wheel via a traditional mechanical linkage assembly. Further, the motor creates counter force on the steering wheel that keeps the steering wheel in the correct position aligned with the wheels, which enables the driver to detect the angle of the wheels. For example, when the driver releases the steering wheel after a turn, the motor acts to rotate the steering wheel back to the straight position as the wheels straighten out, as would be experienced in a traditional mechanical linkage assembly.

In some examples, the worm gear and the helical gear form a relatively high gear ratio, such as 50:1, which enables the use of a relatively small motor while still producing relatively high torque on the helical gear, thereby further decreasing the overall size, weight, and complexity of the steer-by-wire system. Further, the relatively high gear ratio is also beneficial for achieving high precision torque feedback to the driver.

In some examples, the torque feedback actuator assembly includes an angle sensor that measures the rotational angle of the helical gear, which can be directly correlated to the SWA of the steering wheel. In some examples, the angle sensor is implemented as a Hall Effect sensor of an electronic control unit (ECU) of the actuator assembly. The ECU may be implemented on a printed circuit board coupled to the housing in a location where the Hall Effect sensor extends into the housing and adjacent the helical gear. The Hall Effect sensor measures a rotational angle of the helical gear, which can be correlated to the SWA (e.g., the angle of the helical gear is the same as the angle of the steering wheel). By using an angle sensor close to the helical gear, the actuator assembly can remain relatively small and compact, unlike known systems that utilize multiple gears extending from a steering column to determine the SWA.

In some examples, the torque feedback actuator assembly includes a stopping or locking mechanism that prevents the steering wheel from being over rotated in either direction. In particular, because the steering wheel is coupled to the helical gear (which is free to rotate in the housing) and is not directly mechanically coupled to the wheels of the vehicle, the steering wheel is capable of being rotated continuously in either direction. However, in some instances, the steering wheel system may include a clockspring to provide power to the electronics on the steering wheel. To prevent the steering

wheel from being rotated too far in either direction and damaging the clockspring cable, the example torque feedback actuator assembly includes a stopping or locking mechanism that stops rotation at a predefined angle.

In some examples, the steering wheel system and/or the vehicle include(s) a collapsing mechanism that enables the steering wheel system to move into or toward the dashboard in the event of a collision to reduce the impact to the driver's body. For instance, in the event of a vehicle collision, the driver's body may move into the steering wheel. To dampen the impact, the steering wheel system, including the torque feedback actuator assembly, may move into or toward the dashboard to reduce the impact if a threshold force is exerted on the steering wheel system.

FIG. 1 illustrates an example vehicle **100** in which the examples disclosed herein may be implemented. In the illustrated example, the vehicle **100** is depicted as a car (e.g., a sedan). However, in other examples, the vehicle **100** may be implemented as any other type of vehicle, such as a pick-up truck, a van, etc. The vehicle **100** includes a right front wheel **102** and a left front wheel **104** that may be turned or angled to steer the vehicle **100**.

FIG. 1 also illustrates a block diagram of an example steer-by-wire system **106** that may be implemented by the vehicle **100**. As shown in the example block diagram, the steer-by-wire system **106** includes an actuator **108** (e.g., a rotary motor, a hydraulic motor, etc.) and a steering wheel system **112**. The steering wheel system **112** is controlled by a first electrical control unit (ECU) **110** (e.g., a controller), which communicates with a second ECU **111** that controls the actuator **108**. The first and second ECU **110**, **111** form a steer-by-wire controller. The actuator **108** is coupled to tie rods **114**, **116** that are coupled to the front wheels **102**, **104**, respectively. The actuator **108** may be activated (e.g., via the second ECU **111**) to extend and/or retract the tie rods **114**, **116** to turn or angle the front wheels **102**, **104**, thereby steering the vehicle **100**. The actuator **108** may be activated based on input from the steering wheel system **112**.

In the illustrated example, the steering wheel system **112** includes a steering wheel and a SWA sensor (both of which are shown and described in further detail herein) that measures a rotational angle of the steering wheel. The first ECU **110** determines the SWA (based on the measurements from the SWA sensor) and transmits the determined SWA to the second ECU **111**, which activates the actuator **108** to turn the front wheels **102**, **104** based on the SWA. The second ECU **111** may apply a linear or non-linear correlation between the SWA and the angle of the front wheels **102**, **104**.

In some examples, the steer-by-wire system **106** includes a position sensor **120** that detects the current angle of the front wheels **102**, **104** (e.g., based on a position of the actuator **108**) and provides the feedback to the second ECU **111** and, thus, to the first ECU **110**. In response, the first ECU **110** may activate a torque feedback actuator (examples of which are disclosed in further detail herein) in the steering wheel system **112**. The torque feedback actuator maintains the steering wheel at the corresponding SWA (i.e., the SWA that matches or correlates to the current angle of the front wheels **102**, **104**) and/or provides torque feedback on the steering wheel to mimic the force the front wheels **102**, **104** would otherwise have on the steering wheel in a traditional mechanical linkage assembly.

While in the illustrated example the first and second ECUs **110**, **111** are shown as independent components, in other examples, the first and second ECUs **110**, **111** may be implemented by a common/combined ECU in communication with the steering wheel system **112** and the actuator **108**.

The first and/or second ECU(s) **110**, **111** may be implemented by hardware, software, firmware and/or any combination of hardware, software and/or firmware. For example, the first and/or second ECU(s) **110**, **111** could be implemented by one or more analog or digital circuit(s), logic circuits, programmable processor(s), programmable controller(s), digital signal processor(s) (DSP(s)), application specific integrated circuit(s) (ASIC(s)), programmable logic device(s) (PLD(s)) and/or field programmable logic device(s) (FPLD(s)). Also, while in the illustrated example the steer-by-wire system **106** includes one actuator **108**, in other examples, the steer-by-wire system **106** may include more actuators and/or the actuator(s) may be disposed in other locations and used to control the direction of the front wheels **102**, **104**. Further, the steer-by-wire system **106** may include more than one position sensor **120** to detect the current angle of the front wheel(s) **102**, **104** and/or the position sensor(s) may be disposed in other locations (e.g., on the hubs of the wheels).

FIG. 2 is a side view of an example steering wheel system **200** constructed in accordance with teachings of this disclosure. The example steering wheel system **200** may be used to implement the steering wheel system **112** of FIG. 1, for example. The example steering wheel system **200** includes an example steering wheel **202** and an example torque feedback actuator assembly **204** (referred to herein as the actuator assembly **204**). In the illustrated example, the actuator assembly **204** includes an angle sensor **206** to determine the SWA of the steering wheel **202**. The example actuator assembly **204** also includes a motor **208** to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel **202**.

In the illustrated example, the steering wheel system **200** is coupled to an instrument panel or dashboard **210** of the vehicle **100** (FIG. 1). In particular, the torque feedback actuator assembly **204** is coupled to the dashboard **210**, and the steering wheel **202** is coupled to the actuator assembly **204**. As used herein, the terms dashboard and instrument panel are used interchangeably and are defined to mean the surface and/or structure in front of the driver. The dashboard **210** may include one or more gauges, buttons, status indicators, screens, etc. In some examples, the actuator assembly **204** is removably coupled to the dashboard **210**. In the illustrated example, the actuator assembly **204** is coupled to the dashboard **210** via a plurality of threaded fasteners **212**. In other examples, other types of fastening mechanisms may be used. As such, a user (e.g., the driver) can easily attach the steering wheel system **200** to the dashboard **210** when it is desired to use the steering wheel system **200** and detach the steering wheel system **200** from the dashboard **210** when it is not being used. For example, the vehicle **100** may be operable in two modes: (1) a full autonomous mode in which the vehicle **100** drives itself; or (2) a manual steer mode in which the steering wheel system **200** may be used to steer the vehicle **100**. During the full autonomous mode, the steering wheel system **200** is not required. As such, the example steering wheel system **200** may be detached from the dashboard **210** (e.g., by removing the threaded fasteners **212**, by releasing a quick release, etc.) to provide more room in the cabin of the vehicle **100** (e.g., more room between a person sitting in the driver seat and the dashboard **210**). In other examples, when the vehicle **100** is operating in an autonomous mode, the steering wheel system **200** may remain coupled to the dashboard **210** and the actuator assembly **204** may operate in a mode (e.g., a silent wheel mode) to keep the steering wheel **202** stationary, as disclosed in further detail herein. Also, in some examples, the steering wheel system **200** may be universal such that it can be used

with other vehicles. For example, the steering wheel system 200 can be used to similarly control other vehicles. Further, in some examples, the steering wheel system 200 may be detached from the dashboard 210 when the vehicle 100 is not being used, for example, to prevent theft and/or tampering with the vehicle 100.

As disclosed above, because the steering wheel 202 is not directly mechanically coupled (e.g., via a steering column) to the front wheels 102, 104 (FIG. 1), the steering wheel 202 is not directly responsive to changes in the direction of the front wheels 102, 104. For example, in a vehicle having a traditional linkage assembly, after making a turn, a person can release the steering wheel and the change in direction of the wheels causes the steering wheel to rotate back to the straight position (i.e., self-center). Therefore, to maintain the steering wheel 202 at the correct SWA and to mimic or simulate the movement of the front wheels 102, 104 on the steering wheel 202 when coupled to the wheels 102, 104 via a traditional mechanical linkage assembly, the example actuator assembly 204 includes the motor 208. The motor 208 may be activated to create a counter-force on the steering wheel 202 against the force of the driver. Further, the motor 208 may be activated to position the steering wheel 202 at the correct SWA that correlates to the current angle of the front wheels 102, 104, as would be experienced in a traditional linkage assembly.

In the illustrated example, the actuator assembly 204 includes a housing 214 that defines a cavity 216. In the illustrated example, the housing 214 is constructed of a first piece or component 218 and a second piece or component 220 that are coupled to define the cavity 216. However, in other examples the housing 214 may be constructed of a single unitary component or may be constructed of more than two components.

In the illustrated example of FIG. 2, the actuator assembly 204 includes a helical gear 222 that is rotatably disposed in the cavity 216 of the housing 214. The steering wheel 202 is coupled to the helical gear 222 such that the steering wheel 202 and the helical gear 222 rotate together. In the illustrated example, the steering wheel 202 and the helical gear 222 are coaxially aligned along a first axis 224. In other words, the helical gear 222 has a central (rotational) axis that is aligned with a central (rotational) axis of the steering wheel 202, both of which are aligned along the first axis 224.

In the illustrated example of FIG. 2, the motor 208 has an output shaft 226 coupled to a worm gear 228. The worm gear 228 is engaged with (e.g., meshed with) teeth on an edge of the helical gear 222 (sometimes referred to as a worm drive arrangement). The motor 208, when activated, rotates the worm gear 228, which rotates the helical gear 222 and, thus, rotates the steering wheel 202. Thus, the motor 208 provides torque feedback to the steering wheel 202 by driving the helical gear 222. In some examples, the motor 208 is a bidirectional motor that can rotate the worm gear 228 (and, thus, the helical gear 222 and the steering wheel 202) in either direction.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the example actuator assembly 204 taken along line A-A of FIG. 2. As illustrated in FIG. 3, the motor 208 (e.g., the body of the motor 208), the output shaft 226, and the worm gear 228 are aligned along a second axis 300. The second axis 300 is transverse or perpendicular to and offset from the first axis 224 (FIG. 2) along which the steering wheel 202 (FIG. 2) and the helical gear 222 rotate. FIG. 4 shows a perspective view of the helical gear 222, the first axis 224, the worm gear 228, and the second axis 300.

Referring back to FIG. 2, the second axis 300 (from FIG. 3) extends into the page through a center of the worm gear 228. As such, the worm gear 228 and the helical gear 222 transfer rotational motion from one axis to another axis, which are perpendicular and offset from each other. By orienting the motor 208 along the second axis 300, which is perpendicular to and offset from the first axis 224, the motor 208 extends sideways or transversely relative to the face of the dashboard 210, rather than into the dashboard 210 as in known systems in which motors are orientated parallel to the rotational axis of the steering wheel and therefore extend into the face of the dashboard or require significant space between the steering wheel and the dashboard. As such, the motor 208 consumes significantly less (minimal) space between the steering wheel 202 and the dashboard 210 than these known systems. In this example, when the actuator assembly 204 is coupled to the dashboard 210, the motor 208 and the helical gear 222 are disposed between the steering wheel 202 and the dashboard 210 and, thus, utilize less (if any) space in the dashboard 210 of the vehicle 100 as in known systems. Therefore, in some examples, the steering wheel system 200 does not include or require a steering column extending in the dashboard 210 as in known system. In other examples, the motor 208 and/or other components of the actuator assembly 204 may extend into the dashboard 210 (e.g., into a recess or opening formed in an outer surface of the dashboard 210). In either configuration, the packaging of the example actuator assembly 204 is substantially smaller and less deep than known assemblies and thus, extends less into the dashboard 210 than known assemblies.

As shown in the illustrated example of FIG. 3, the housing 214 includes first and second brackets 302, 304 to hold the motor 208. In other examples, the actuator assembly 204 may include more brackets and/or additional structures to couple the motor 208 to the housing 214. In the illustrated example, the housing 214 also includes three tabs or flanges 306 through which the threaded fasteners 212 pass. In other examples, the housing 214 may include more or fewer flanges 306 depending on the number of fasteners to be used, for example.

The example motor 208 may be, for example, a brushless 3-phase direct current (DC) motor. In other examples, the motor 208 may be another type of motor (e.g., an alternating current (AC) motor). In some examples, the helical gear 222 and the worm gear 228 are sized to provide a worm ratio or gear reduction ratio of 50:1. With such a high gear ratio, the motor 208 can be relatively small while still producing a relatively large torque on the helical gear 222, such as 50 newton meters (nm) of torque. As such, a smaller, lighter motor can be employed instead of bulky, large motors as in known systems. In other examples, the helical gear 222 and the worm gear 228 may be sized to provide a higher or lower gear reduction ratio.

Referring back to FIG. 2, the example actuator assembly 204 includes an electrical control unit (ECU) board 230 that supports the first ECU 110 for activating the motor 208 and/or determining the SWA. In the illustrated example, the ECU board 230 is coupled to a back side of the housing 214 (e.g., a side of the housing 214 facing the dashboard 210). In other examples, the ECU board 230 may be coupled to the housing 214 in another location. As disclosed above, the example actuator assembly 204 includes the angle sensor 206 to determine the SWA. In this example, the angle sensor 206 measures or detects a rotational angle of the helical gear 222, which can then be used by the first ECU 110 to determine the SWA. For example, because the steering

wheel **202** and the helical gear **222** are coupled to each other to rotate together, the rotational angle of the helical gear **222** equals the SWA. The first ECU **110** determines the SWA based on the rotational angle of the helical gear **222**, which is then communicated to the second ECU **111** (FIG. 1) for activating the actuator **108**.

In some examples, the relatively large gear ratio between the helical gear **222** and the worm gear **228** results in a small resistance when turning the steering wheel **202**, which helps mimic the resistance felt in a steering wheel with a traditional mechanical linkage assembly (instead of allowing the steering wheel **202** to rotate loosely). Further, in some examples, the first ECU **110** applies a small voltage to the motor **208**, which further helps create resistance on the steering wheel **202** that can be felt by the driver when turning the steering wheel **202**. As the vehicle **100** is driving, the first ECU **110** determines a target torque (e.g., a restoring force) to apply to the helical gear **222** based on the SWA and the angle of the front wheels **102**, **104** (FIG. 1). The first ECU **110** applies a larger or smaller voltage to the motor **208** depending on the torque to be applied to the steering wheel **202**.

In the illustrated example, the angle sensor **206** is coupled to the ECU board **230** and extends through an opening in the housing **214** into the cavity **216** adjacent the helical gear **222**. This location enables a smaller, more compact packaging. In some examples, the angle sensor **206** is a Hall Effect sensor. In some such examples, one or more magnets may be provided on the rear side of the helical gear **222**. For example, one ring-shaped magnet may be provided on the rear side of the helical gear **222** (e.g., the side facing the ECU board **230**). In another example, multiple magnets (e.g., three magnets) may be coupled to the rear side of the helical gear **222** and spaced apart from the each other (e.g., spaced equidistant from each other). An example magnet **231** is shown in FIG. 2 coupled to the rear side of the helical gear **222**. The Hall Effect sensor measures the strength of the magnetic field as the helical gear rotates **222**. Based on the measured magnetic field, the first ECU **110** can determine the angular position of the helical gear **222** and, thus, the SWA. In some examples, multiple Hall Effect sensors are disposed on the ECU board **230** and measure the magnetic field caused by the magnet(s), which may be used to determine (e.g., via triangulation) the rotational angle of the helical gear **222**. In another example, a separate smaller gear may be rotated by the helical gear **222**. The smaller gear may have one or more magnet(s), and the Hall Effect sensor may measure the strength of the magnetic field of the smaller gear, which may be used to determine the rotational position of the helical gear **222**. In still other examples, the angle sensor **206** may be implemented as another type of sensor. Further, in some examples, more than one angle sensor may be used.

In some examples, when the vehicle **100** is operating in an autonomous mode, the actuator assembly **204** may operate in a quiet mode to keep the steering wheel **202** stationary (e.g., at the 0° position). For example, the first ECU **110** may apply a small current to the motor **208**, which locks the steering wheel **202** in place against small forces. If a larger force is applied to the steering wheel (e.g., if a passenger attempts to rotate the steering wheel **202**), the angle sensor **206** may sense the attempted rotation of the steering wheel **202** and the first ECU **110** may apply a larger current to the motor **208**, which creates a larger torque feedback on the steering wheel **202** that keeps the steering wheel **202** in the same position.

In the illustrated example, the actuator assembly **204** includes an electrical connector **232** (e.g., a wiring harness) that connects to the first ECU **110** and/or a clockspring **234** (disclosed in further detail herein) of the actuator assembly **204** to the second ECU **111** (FIG. 1) and/or any other ECU of the vehicle **100**. The electrical connector **232** may be connected to a corresponding connector in the vehicle **100** (e.g., on the dashboard **210**) to receive power and/or communicate with the other systems of the vehicle **100**, such as the second ECU **111** (FIG. 1).

In the illustrated example, the steering wheel **202** is removably coupled to the helical gear **222** via a threaded fastener **236**, such as a retaining bolt. In the illustrated example, the helical gear **222** includes an extension **238** with a threaded opening **240**. The extension **238** extends through an opening **242** in the housing **214**. The threaded fastener **236** is inserted through the steering wheel **202** and screwed into the threaded opening **240** of the extension **238** to couple the steering wheel **202** to the helical gear **222**. However, in other examples, the steering wheel **202** may be coupled to the helical gear **222** using other mechanical and/or chemical fastening mechanisms (e.g., a slot and key, a pin, an adhesive, welding, etc.). In some examples, the steering wheel **202** is fixedly coupled to the helical gear **222** and cannot be removed from the helical gear **222** without damage to the parts of the steering wheel system **200**.

In some examples, the steering wheel system **200** includes the clockspring **234**. The clockspring **234** enables the steering wheel **202** to rotate while still providing electrical connectivity to one or more electronic components (e.g., an airbag, a volume button, a cruise control button, a horn button, etc.) on the steering wheel **202**. In particular, the clockspring **234** is operatively coupled to the steering wheel **202** (e.g., via a cable) to provide electrical power to the one or more electronic components on the steering wheel **202** and/or communicate signals between the one or more electronic components on the steering wheel **202** and an ECU of the vehicle **100**. In the illustrated example, the clockspring **234** is disposed between the housing **214** and the steering wheel **202**. In some examples, the clockspring **234** is coupled to the housing **214** and remains stationary with the housing **214**.

In some examples, to prevent the steering wheel **202** from being rotated beyond a threshold amount in either direction (clockwise or counter-clockwise), the actuator assembly **204** includes a stopping or locking mechanism. For example, as shown in FIG. 2, the example actuator assembly **204** includes a lockout bolt **244**. The lockout bolt **244** is threadably engaged with the threaded opening **240** of the helical gear **222**. In some examples, the section of the threaded opening **240** engaged by the lockout bolt **244** has a different thread size than the section of the threaded opening **240** engaged by the threaded fastener **236**. A head **246** of the lockout bolt **244** is disposed between a first stop **248** and a second stop **250** of the housing **214**. The lockout bolt **244** may be keyed and/or disposed in an opening that prevents the lockout bolt **244** from rotating. Instead, the lockout bolt **244** only moves in a linear direction into or out of the threaded opening **240** (to the left and right in FIG. 2) as the helical gear **222** is rotated. Thus, as the steering wheel **202** and the helical gear **222** are rotated in one direction, the lockout bolt **244** is moved toward the dashboard **210** (e.g., to the right in FIG. 2) and, as the steering wheel **202** and the helical gear **222** are rotated in the opposite direction, the lockout bolt **244** is moved toward the steering wheel **202** (e.g., to the left in FIG. 2). When the lockout bolt **244** is moved beyond a threshold amount in either direction, the

head **246** of the lockout bolt **244** engages or contacts one of the stops **248**, **250**, which prevents the lockout bolt **244** from moving further and, thus, prevents the helical gear **222** and the steering wheel **202** from being rotated further.

In some examples, the lockout bolt **244** is arranged to allow the steering wheel **202** to rotate within a threshold range of $\pm 360^\circ$. The threshold range may be defined by the thread size of the threaded opening **240** and the lockout bolt **244**, the length of the lockout bolt **244**, and/or the distance between the two stops **248**, **250**. In other examples, the lockout bolt **244** can be arranged to allow the steering wheel **202** to rotate in a larger or smaller threshold range (e.g., $\pm 270^\circ$, $\pm 540^\circ$, etc.).

The lockout bolt **244** also advantageously prevents rotation even when no power is provided to the actuator assembly **204**. For example, if the vehicle **100** (FIG. 1) is powered off and a person tries to rotate the steering wheel **202** (and no counter force is provided by the motor **208**), the lockout bolt **244** prevents the steering wheel **202** from being rotated beyond a threshold amount that could break or damage the actuator assembly **204**. Also, if the steering wheel system **200** includes a clockspring, such as the clockspring **234**, the lockout bolt **244** prevents the steering wheel **202** from being rotated beyond a threshold amount (e.g., based on the length of electrical cable in the clockspring **234**) in either direction that would otherwise break or damage the clockspring **234**. While in the illustrated example the lockout bolt **244** is used to limit the amount the steering wheel **202** can be rotated in either direction, in other examples, other types of stopping or lockout mechanisms may be used, such as a ball screw, a threaded worm/nut, a cam, a hard stop, etc.

In the illustrated example, the housing **214** is coupled to the dashboard **210** via the threaded fasteners **212**, which enables the actuator assembly **204** to be easily attached to and detached from the dashboard **210**. In the illustrated example of FIGS. 2 and 3, three threaded fasteners **212** are used (two of which are shown in FIG. 2). In other examples, the housing **214** may be coupled to the dashboard **210** using more or fewer threaded fasteners. In other examples, other types of fastening mechanism(s) (e.g., pin and slot fasteners, snaps, a quick release, etc.) may be used to attach the housing **214** and/or another part of the actuator assembly **204** to the dashboard **210** and/or any other structure of the vehicle **100**. In some examples, the torque feedback actuator assembly **204** is coupled to a relatively flat surface or panel of the dashboard **210**.

In some examples, the steering wheel system **200** and/or the vehicle **100** may include a collapsing mechanism that enables the steering wheel system **200** to move or collapse into the dashboard **210** in the event of impact (e.g., during a collision). For example, in the illustrated example of FIG. 5, the dashboard **210** includes an opening or recess **500**, and the torque feedback actuator assembly **204** is coupled to the dashboard **210** around the opening **500**. In the illustrated example, the threaded fasteners **212** are connected to respective collapsing brackets **502**, which are coupled to respective rails **504** that extend into the dashboard **210**. FIG. 6A is an enlarged view of one of the collapsing brackets **502** and the corresponding rail **504**, and FIG. 6B is a cross-sectional view of the example collapsing bracket **502** and the example rail **504** taken along line B-B in FIG. 6A. As shown in FIG. 6A, the collapsing bracket **502** includes a first portion **600** (e.g., a face portion) and a second portion **602**, which are coupled to form a 90° corner. The threaded fastener **212** couples the flange **306** of the housing **214** to the first portion **600** of the collapsing bracket **502**. The second portion **602** is disposed in a slot **604** of the rail **504**, as shown in FIGS.

6A and **6B**. The interface (e.g., friction) between the walls of the slot **604** and the second portion **602** hold the collapsing bracket **502** in place until a threshold force is applied. When a threshold force is applied, the collapsing bracket **502** slides further into the slot **604** in the rail **504**. Therefore, should the driver (or another object) engage the steering wheel **202** (FIG. 5) and/or airbag on the steering wheel **202** (e.g., during a collision) with a sufficient force (e.g., a threshold force), the collapsing brackets **502** slide into the rails **504**, which enables the steering wheel system **200** to move into the opening **500** (FIG. 5) in the dashboard **210**, which helps reduce the impact imparted to the driver. In other examples, a strap or tab may be disposed in the slot **604** that, when engaged by the collapsing bracket **502** with a sufficient force, breaks or snaps and enables the collapsing bracket **502** to slide along the rail **504**.

FIG. 7 illustrates another example collapsing mechanism that may be implemented with the example steering wheel system **200**. In the example of FIG. 7, the example steering wheel system **200** is coupled, via the fasteners **212**, to a plate **700**. A shaft **702** extends from a rear of the plate **700**. The shaft **702** may be inserted through an opening **704** in the dashboard **210** and into a tube **706** mounted (e.g., welded) on a cross beam **708**. The shaft **702** and the tube **706** may be splined to prevent the shaft **702** from rotating relative to the tube **706**. In the illustrated example, a locking lever **710** is coupled to the tube **706**. The locking lever **710** locks the shaft **702** in the tube **706** at a desired depth, which enables a user to change the location of the steering wheel system **200** relative to the dashboard **210** (e.g., enables the steering wheel system **200** to telescope in or out of the dashboard **210**). The locking lever **710** may be a manual locking lever (e.g., activated manually by a hand of a user) or an electronic locking lever (e.g., activated via a button on the dashboard **210**). In some examples, the shaft **702** can be removed from the tube **706**, which enables the steering wheel system **200**, along with the plate **700** and the shaft **702**, to be removed from the dashboard **210** and stowed away (e.g., when the vehicle **100** is not being used, when the vehicle **100** is operating in an autonomous mode and the steering wheel system **200** is not needed, etc.). In some examples, the cross beam **708** and/or the tube **706** is rotatable, such that the steering wheel system **200** can be rotated downward and stored beneath the dashboard **210**. In some examples, the locking lever **710** allows the shaft **702** to move into the tube **706** when a threshold force is exerted on the locking lever **710**. As such, if the driver contacts the steering wheel **202** (e.g., during a collision), the steering wheel system **200** can move toward the dashboard **210** to reduce the impact on the driver.

From the foregoing, it will be appreciated that example systems, apparatus, and articles of manufacture have been disclosed that provide torque feedback on a steering wheel of a steer-by-wire vehicle. The example torque feedback actuator assemblies disclosed herein have a relatively short or shallow depth compared to known torque feedback actuator assemblies that extend far into the depth of the dashboard. Further, the example torque feedback actuator assemblies can be easily detached from a vehicle when not being used and stowed away to provide more room in the cabin of the vehicle. Also, the example torque feedback actuator assemblies utilize a worm gear and helical gear that enables use of a relatively small motor while still producing relatively high torque feedback on the steering wheel.

Although certain example systems, apparatus, and articles of manufacture have been disclosed herein, the scope of coverage of this patent is not limited thereto. On the con-

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rary, this patent covers all systems, apparatus and articles of manufacture fairly falling within the scope of the claims of this patent.

What is claimed is:

1. A vehicle comprising:
 - a dashboard having an opening;
 - a steering wheel system to interface with a steer-by-wire system of the vehicle, the steering wheel system disposed adjacent the opening, the steering wheel system including:
 - a steering wheel; and
 - a torque feedback actuator assembly to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel;
 - a rail coupled to the dashboard; and
 - a bracket, the steering wheel system coupled to the bracket, the bracket slidably disposed in a slot in the rail, wherein a frictional interface between the bracket and the rail holds the bracket relative to the rail until a threshold force is exerted, thereby enabling the steering wheel system to move into the opening upon application of a force on the steering wheel system that meets or exceeds the threshold force.
2. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the rail is disposed along an inner peripheral edge of the dashboard defining the opening.
3. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the rail is a first rail and the bracket is a first bracket, the vehicle further including:
 - a second bracket coupled to the dashboard; and
 - a second rail, the steering wheel system coupled to the second bracket, the second bracket slidably disposed in a slot of the second rail.
4. The vehicle of claim 3, wherein the first and second rails are disposed in the opening.
5. The vehicle of claim 4, wherein the second rail is disposed on an opposite side of the opening as the first rail.
6. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the torque feedback actuator assembly includes:
 - a housing coupled to the bracket;
 - a helical gear rotatably disposed in the housing, the steering wheel coupled to and coaxially aligned with the helical gear; and
 - a motor with a worm gear engaged with the helical gear to provide the torque feedback to the steering wheel by driving the helical gear.
7. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the housing is coupled to the bracket via a threaded fastener.
8. The vehicle of claim 7, wherein the bracket includes a first portion and a second portion, the housing coupled to the first portion via the threaded fastener, the second portion disposed in the slot of the rail.
9. The vehicle of claim 8, wherein the first and second portions form a 90° corner.
10. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the housing has a smaller diameter than the opening.
11. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the torque feedback actuator assembly includes:
 - an electronic control unit (ECU) circuit board; and
 - an angle sensor to measure a rotational angle of the helical gear, the angle sensor coupled to the ECU circuit board adjacent the helical gear.
12. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the torque feedback actuator assembly does not include a steering column extending into or through the dashboard.
13. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the vehicle is operable in an autonomous driving mode.

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14. A steering system for a vehicle, the steering system comprising:

- a steering wheel system to interface with a steer-by-wire system of the vehicle, the steering wheel system aligned with a recess in a dashboard of the vehicle, the steering wheel system including:
 - a steering wheel; and
 - a torque feedback actuator assembly to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel;
- a rail coupled to the dashboard;
- a bracket, the steering wheel system coupled to the bracket, the bracket slidably disposed in a slot in the rail; and
- a strap or a tab disposed in the slot, the strap or the tab to break when a threshold force is exerted, thereby enabling the steering wheel system to move into the recess upon application of a force on the steering wheel system that meets or exceeds the threshold force.

15. The steering system of claim 14, wherein the rail is disposed along an inner peripheral edge of the dashboard defining the recess.

16. The steering system of claim 14, wherein the torque feedback actuator assembly includes:

- a housing coupled to the bracket;
- a helical gear rotatably disposed in the housing, the steering wheel coupled to and coaxially aligned with the helical gear; and
- a motor with a worm gear engaged with the helical gear to provide the torque feedback to the steering wheel by driving the helical gear.

17. The steering system of claim 16, wherein the helical gear includes a threaded opening, the torque feedback actuator assembly including:

- a bolt threadably engaged with the threaded opening, the bolt to move in a linear direction into or out of the threaded opening as the helical gear is rotated;
- a first stop disposed on a first side of a head of the bolt; and
- a second stop disposed on a second side of the head of the bolt, wherein, when the helical gear is rotated beyond a threshold amount in either direction, the head of the bolt engages one of the first or second stops and prevents further rotation of the steering wheel.

18. A vehicle comprising:

- a dashboard;
- a steering wheel system to interface with a steer-by-wire system of the vehicle, the steering wheel system including:
 - a steering wheel; and
 - a torque feedback actuator assembly to provide torque feedback to the steering wheel;
- a plate, the steering wheel system coupled to the plate;
- a shaft extending from a rear of the plate and through an opening in the dashboard;
- a beam on an opposite side of the dashboard as the steering wheel system;
- a tube coupled to the beam, the shaft extending into the tube; and
- a locking lever coupled to the tube to lock the shaft relative to the tube, the locking lever to enable the shaft to move into the tube when a threshold force is exerted, thereby enabling the steering wheel system to move into the opening upon application of a force on the steering wheel system that meets or exceeds the threshold force.

19. The vehicle of claim 18, wherein the shaft and the tube are splined to prevent the shaft from rotating relative to the tube.

20. The vehicle of claim 18, wherein the steering wheel system is removably coupled to the plate via threaded fasteners.

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